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“Making Her Community a Better Place to Live”: Culturally Responsive Urban School Leadership in Historical Context

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This article examines the notion of “culturally responsive leadership” through a historical case study of the life of Gertrude Elise MacDougald Ayer, the first African American woman principal in New York City. I begin by situating Ayer’s leadership practice in light of the social and political context of Harlem in the 1930s and early 1940s. Then I compare her leadership approach to findings from historiographies of African American educators before 1960, as well as current case studies of African American women leaders. In the end I conceptualize the “culturally responsive” urban school leader as public intellectual, curriculum innovator, and social activist and argue that leadership for social justice must be analyzed in light of the historical, political, and social contexts in which it is practiced.

A teacher’s work does not end in the schoolroom. The needs of the pupil and his after school life . . . (and encouraging) an unselfish urge to make his community a better place to live should be her immediate concern.¹

Gertrude Elise McDougald Ayer
Harlem Educator, 1885–1971

Leading urban schools in the United States has never been easy. During much of the past century urban school leaders have been faced with a plethora of political, economic, and pedagogical challenges—highly centralized and bureaucratic organizational structures, antiquated and overcrowded school buildings, meager and outdated curriculum materials and technological equipment, changing racial and ethnic demographics, and the

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¹ “Why a Teacher Should Also Serve as a Social Worker; Elise MacDougald Ayer in 2-Fold Service.” *Scrapbook*, Gertrude Ayer Papers (hereafter GEA papers).

lack of adequate social services, health facilities, and employment opportunities in city neighborhoods (see, for e.g. Rousmaniere, 1997; Tyack, 1974). Efforts to respond to these challenges and “lead for diversity” in urban communities have been particularly absent from the historical record, however, in part because city school districts have left behind few official records that document the development and influence of progressive curriculum innovations and diversity policies on the day-to-day practices of urban teachers and leaders (Donato & Lazerson, 2000). Through examining alternative sources, however, particularly accounts about schools and schooling in the African American press and ethnic newspapers, the archives of race relations and civil rights organizations, and the oral histories of educational activists, historical portraits of urban school leaders who made a difference emerge—principals, superintendents, teacher union leaders, and community advocates who worked to transform the curriculum, promote equality, and make schooling more responsive to diverse students and their families in cities across the country before 1950 (see, e.g., Johnson, 2003).

This article describes the culturally responsive practices of one such leader—Gertrude Elise Johnson McDougald Ayer, the first African American woman to become a New York City principal.² I examine her leadership practices in Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s in light of the precepts of “culturally responsive” pedagogy (see, e.g. Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) to analyze how she incorporated students’ cultural knowledge as a vehicle for learning, fostered the development of sociopolitical consciousness and democratic citizenship in her elementary school, and advocated for social and political reform in the wider Harlem community.

My purpose here is threefold. First, I aim to restore Ayer’s legacy as a socially conscious and progressive African American woman principal and early school leader for social justice whose work predates the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision and the Southern civil rights movement.³ Second, I situate Ayer’s leadership practice in light of the social and political context of Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s, and compare her leadership approach to findings from historiographies of African American

² Ayer was featured prominently in several national and local newspapers in the 1930s and early 1940s, including *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *Newsweek*, *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, the *Amsterdam News*, and the *New York Age*. She even made a cameo appearance in *The Negro Soldier*, a classic World War II film produced in 1944 by Frank Capra’s Office of War Information that highlighted the role of African Americans in the military as well as other “firsts” for Black Americans. After her retirement in 1954 her legacy as a high-profile New York City school leader was largely forgotten.

³ Here I am dating the Southern civil rights movement from a series of landmark events in the 1950s and early 1960s: the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, and the lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960. Although there is a growing historical scholarship that reconceptualizes the roots of the civil rights movement in terms of political activism in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly in Northern cities (see, for e.g. Biondi, 2003), many educators continue to trace diversity efforts in the schools to civil rights activity in the 1950s and 1960s.

educators before 1960, as well as current case studies of African American women leaders, in order to establish a historical continuum of African American women's educational practice.⁴ In conclusion, I propose some tentative principles of culturally responsive school leadership that highlight the leader's stance as a change agent vis-à-vis the larger community. I argue that approaches to leadership for social justice must be analyzed within particular historical, political, and social contexts.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

This historical case study of a school leader surveyed primary sources from several historical archives to develop a biographical profile and reconstruct Gertrude Ayer's educational philosophy and leadership practice. Appleby (1992) characterizes this process of excavating the perspectives and experiences of those groups who have been marginalized in American history as the "recovery of memory . . . lifting from obscurity those who have been left behind, excluded, disinherited from the American heritage" (p. 428). I stumbled upon Ayer's life story as I was investigating another project, the intercultural education movement in New York City during the 1930s and 1940s (Johnson, 2002). As I delved further into diversity efforts in New York City during the Depression and World War II, Ayer emerged as one of several African American women activists who lived and taught in Harlem during this time period (see, e.g. Johnson, 2004). I studied archival sources located at the Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture, New York Public Library which included Ayer's scrapbook, investigative reports and articles she authored, and newspaper accounts and photographs depicting her community involvement. I examined evaluative reports and teacher union newspaper accounts regarding the "Activity Program" and other curriculum projects implemented by Ayer during the 1930s and 1940s which are housed in the New York City Board of Education archives, Special Collections, Teachers College, Columbia University and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) Archives, Robert Wagner Labor Collection, New York University. I also surveyed back issues of African American community newspapers including the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *New York Age*, and journals such as *Opportunity* (the official organ of the National Urban League) and *The Crisis* (the NAACP journal) for a thirty-year period from

⁴ As Siddle Walker notes, scholarship on African American leadership has focused on national educational leaders such as W. E. B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Thurgood Marshall and generally ignored the ways in which local leaders (particularly women principals, I might add) have influenced community development (Siddle Walker, 2003). However, recent historical studies are beginning to document the lives and careers of other Black women principals before 1954. See Danna (2003) for a discussion of the career of Maudelle Bousfield, the first African American principal of a Chicago public school who was appointed in 1939.

1923 to 1954 to locate Ayer's writings on educational and social issues. Finally, I utilized secondary sources on the history of Harlem, civil rights work and labor organizing in New York City, and Black women's philanthropic organizations to contextualize Ayer's leadership in light of key political and social events in Harlem during the 1930s and 1940s.

PROFILE OF A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOL LEADER⁵

Gertrude Elise Johnson was born in midtown Manhattan in 1885, the daughter of Dr. Peter Johnson, one of the first African American doctors in New York City and Mary Elizabeth Johnson, a British seamstress who had emigrated from the Isle of Wight as a child.⁶ She attended high school at Girls' Technical High School (now known as Washington Irving High School), where she became the school's senior class president and its first African American graduate in 1903. After high school, she earned a teaching certificate at the New York Training School for Teachers and taught for six years before resigning in 1911 to marry Cornelius McDougald, a Harlem attorney, and raise a family.⁷ In 1916, with two small children (a son, Cornelius, and a daughter, Elizabeth), Ayer began work around labor issues that affected African American girls and women.⁸ Her first position was at the Manhattan Trade School as a vocational counselor, securing positions for African American girls in the city's more prestigious vocational programs and counseling them to stay in school. Next she took a post as industrial secretary of the local Urban League, where she studied working conditions for African American women immediately after World War I (A New Day for the Colored Woman Worker, 1919). During this period of her life Ayer also developed an experimental vocational guidance program at P.S. 89 through the Henry Street Settlement House and headed the Harlem Women's Division of the Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee.

⁵ A version of this biographical profile appeared in Johnson (2004).

⁶ In our current understanding of race, Ayer could be considered of "mixed" racial background because her father was African American with American Indian ancestors and her mother was white and British. However, by all historical accounts (including her own), she affiliated culturally as an African American and lived, worked, and married within the African American community. The differences in the way that the White media and the Black press discussed her accomplishments at the time are instructive about U. S. racial views in the 1930s. African American newspapers across the country were laudatory and proud of her struggle to attain the principalship after years of battling the system. *Time* magazine, on the other hand, used racist terms like "ragged Negro moppets" to describe the children at P.S. 24 and emphasized what they termed Ayer's "light skin" and "kinkless" hair. See, for example, "Mrs. Gertrude Ayers Appointed Principal" (1935) and "Harlem's First" (1935).

⁷ Ayer notes that she was required to quit her teaching position because the New York City Board of Education did not provide maternity leave at the time. See *Scrapbook*, GEA papers.

⁸ In 1925 she divorced her first husband, and in 1928 she was remarried to Dr. Vernon Ayer, the first African American medical examiner for the New York City schools. She took his surname and thereafter became known professionally as Gertrude Ayer.

In February, 1935 Gertrude Ayer received a temporary appointment as principal of Harlem's P.S. 24 after years of battling the New York City Board of Education's examination system that had proved discriminatory to Black teachers and administrators.⁹ She assumed leadership of the predominately African American school during the depths of the Depression, when the unemployment rate in the neighborhood was over 60% and half of the families were on relief. As the standard of living for Harlem families plummeted during the Depression years, neighborhood health and recreational facilities, educational opportunities, and social services failed to keep pace with community needs. The Harlem public schools, in particular, provided stark evidence of the effects of years of underfunding and neglect by the central school bureaucracy in Brooklyn. Harlem parents complained to school officials about unsanitary and dilapidated school buildings, overcrowded classrooms on double and triple shifts, outdated curriculum materials, the lack of psychological and social work services, and the racial insensitivity of many White administrators and teachers who regarded assignment to a Harlem school as a "punishment" (Education Hearing, 1935). Despite the increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the New York public schools in the 1930s, school officials had made little effort to diversify the teaching force. By 1935 African American teachers constituted only 2–3% of New York City teachers, and constituted a minority of the teachers in most Harlem schools.¹⁰

On March 19, 1935, shortly after Ayer assumed leadership at P.S. 24, Harlem erupted in an "uprising" which resulted in \$2,000,000 of property damage along 125th St. (the main thoroughfare) and three deaths, including an African American teenager who was shot by the police as he innocently ran from a looted store. The majority of stores looted that night were owned by White businessmen who lived outside the neighborhood and had refused to hire Black employees (Greenberg, 1997).

⁹ Although she passed the written examination, Ayer was initially denied her principal license on the ground of "insufficient meritorious record" because a former White principal under whom she served as assistant principal did not rate her highly enough on the examiner's form. On appeal, Ayers pointed out that she had received consistently high ratings from the same supervisor on her semiannual ratings and raised the issue that an administrator could not be given high ratings for one purpose and a low rating for another based on the identical service record. She won her appeal, and was permanently appointed principal of P.S. 24 in February 1936. In retrospect, Ayer's permanent appointment the year after the Harlem Riot Commission might be an instance of what Critical Race Theorists term "interest convergence"—that Whites will promote advances for Blacks only when they also serve White interests (Bell, 1980). With increased scrutiny on the Harlem schools, there was mounting pressure on the New York City Board of Education to appoint a Black administrator in Harlem. See "Principals' Ratings Must Jibe," and "First Negro Woman Wins Principal Post," *Scrapbook*, GEA papers.

¹⁰ Estimates of the number of Black teachers in the New York City schools in the 1930s range from 500 to 800 because as a result of their "colorblind" policy the New York City Board of Education claimed they did not compile statistics on the race of New York City students or faculty (See Tyack, 1974, p. 226). In her article on the occupational roles of African American women, Ayer notes that there were approximately 300 African American women teaching in Harlem. At P.S. 24 there were only three African American teachers amongst a faculty of 24. See McDougald (1925).

Although there was official condemnation, community leaders agreed that the “Harlem Riot of 1935” represented a spontaneous outpouring of anger and frustration at police brutality, worsening economic conditions, and ongoing racial discrimination in Harlem. In response, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia appointed an interracial commission of prominent New Yorkers who conducted a series of community forums to study the neighborhood conditions that led to the “riot.” Gertrude Ayer and several of the teachers from her school testified at these hearings. In the verbatim transcripts from the Commission’s education hearings Ayer describes working to gain the trust of parents, establish a more relaxed atmosphere in the school, and provide additional relief services for unemployed families within weeks of her arrival as principal (Education Hearing, 1935).

In the spring of 1935 Ayer also became one of the pioneers in the Activity Program, an experiment to implement child-centered progressive education in New York City’s public elementary schools. The intent of the program was to “shift the emphasis of teaching in the elementary school from subject matter to the child” (Morrison, 1941, p. 5). Similar to well-known progressive education curriculum implemented in New York City private schools (Semel & Sadovnik, 1999), students in the Activity Program engaged in experiential learning, self-directed projects, interdisciplinary curriculum, and classroom experiments in “democratic living.”

At P.S. 24 the Activity Program incorporated intercultural curriculum, human relations work, and neighborhood field trips because of Ayer’s background and interest in this area. When Ayer noted friction between students of West Indian background and those born in the United States, a social studies unit was planned on life in the Caribbean (Ayer, 1963). Parents were invited in to share family artifacts, children decorated the hallways with murals depicting Caribbean scenes, and a school fair was held in which each class contributed plays or musical performances. Parents and students also took school-sponsored fieldtrips to neighborhood cultural institutions such as the Schomburg Center for Negro Literature that offered regular lectures on African and African American history and readings by Harlem writers such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright.

A progressive administrator with a strong ethic of care, Gertrude Ayer created a community-centered school at P. S. 24 (and later as the principal of P.S. 119) where parents were welcomed, material resources were provided for families in need, and the cultural life of the surrounding neighborhood was viewed as a resource. Her commitment to the Harlem schools also included mentoring and promoting the next generation of school leaders. When asked why there weren’t more Black principals in Harlem’s schools, Ayer argued that parents and community members must be advocates. In her words:

If parents and community leaders would demand more Negro principals, the Board of Education and Assistant Superintendents who select

them would have to bow to the taxpayers' demands. (Retired Principal Wants More Respect for Teachers, Gertrude Ayer Scrapbook)

She died in her Harlem home on July 10, 1971 at the age of 86.

THE CONTOURS OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE URBAN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

How might Gertrude Ayer's leadership practices in the 1930s and 1940s be characterized as culturally responsive? Although there is little discussion of this concept in the school leadership literature, in multicultural education circles the features of culturally relevant or culturally responsive pedagogy have been articulated and refined over the past fifteen years. Ladson-Billings (1995a; 1995b) built her "pedagogy of opposition" on the shoulders of previous anthropological work that noted a cultural mismatch between students from culturally diverse backgrounds and their teachers, particularly in terms of language and verbal participation structures. Incorporating the work of Irvine (1990) and Perry (1993), Ladson-Billings adopted a micro-through macrolevel approach to the education of African American students that included a focus on classroom interactions, school policies, and societal and historical contexts. In Ladson-Billings' (1995b) view, culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three propositions: a) students must experience academic success; b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the social order. In her now classic study of eight exemplary teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings offers specific examples of how these teachers incorporated local cultural knowledge and community members' expertise into the classroom to improve student achievement and engaged students in social action projects for collective empowerment (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995a; 1995b; see also Tate, 1995).

In their model of culturally responsive teaching, Villegas and Lucas (2002) describe culturally responsive teachers as those who: a) have a sociopolitical consciousness; b) affirm views of students from diverse backgrounds; c) are both responsible for and capable of bringing about educational change; d) embrace constructivist views of teaching and learning; and e) build on students' prior knowledge and beliefs while stretching them beyond the familiar (p. xiv). Gay and Kirkland (2003) emphasize the critical consciousness aspect of culturally responsive teaching, arguing that teachers must know who they are as people, understand the contexts in which they teach, and question their knowledge base and assumptions. They posit that these qualities are as important as developing effective instructional techniques (p. 181). In sum, most approaches to culturally relevant or culturally

responsive instruction not only utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning, but also teach students how to develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that enables them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 162).

Surprisingly, there have been few attempts to apply this culturally responsive framework to the study of leadership practice in urban schools. Those efforts that come closest have been a series of recent case studies of African American women principals (see, e.g. Dillard, 1995; Reitzug & Patterson, 1998; Bloom and Erlandson, 2003). Collectively, the women leaders profiled in these studies emphasize high expectations for student academic achievement, an ethic of care (or what Reitzug & Patterson, 1998 term "empowerment through care"), and a commitment to the larger "community." Lomotey (1989) also found that the three African American principals he studied in the 1980s had a deep compassion for their students and a commitment to the educability of African American children in general. Alston's (2005) characterization of Black women superintendents as "tempered radicals and servant leaders" extends this ethic of care and commitment to the entire school district in her depiction of African American women leaders who serve the community, but are not afraid to "rock the boat."

Other recent studies that illustrate aspects of what I am terming "culturally responsive leadership" include Scheurich's (1998) description of the core beliefs and organizational culture of "HiPass" schools lead by principals of color in the border region of Texas. These include the leaders' beliefs that all children can succeed, the child-centered and "loving" nature of the schools, and the valuing of the "racial culture and first language of the children."¹¹

When placed side-by-side with revisionist historiographies of African American educators before 1960 (see, for e.g. Siddie Walker, 2001), these recent case studies of African American school leaders provide a historical continuum of culturally responsive practice for African American students. In contrast to previous historical studies that largely portrayed African American teachers in segregated schools as victims of oppressive circumstances, Siddie Walker (2001) emphasizes the agency of African American teachers who sought to be involved in community events and serve as role models for students by being upstanding members of the community; remained devoted to "teaching well," putting in the extra hours to ensure that African American students had the support they needed; cared about the

¹¹ Scheurich (1998) terms these schools "hybrid" because of their incorporation of certain aspects of the dominant Anglo culture (e.g. using high-stakes tests to drive instruction).

whole student and held them to high expectations; related the curriculum to the students' needs; and received community support for their efforts.

Two aspects of "culturally responsive leadership" that have received little attention in previous published case studies, however, are detailed descriptions of how school leaders have incorporated the history, values, and cultural knowledge of students' home communities in the school curriculum and worked to develop a critical consciousness among both students and faculty to challenge inequities in the larger society. In the remainder of this article I will discuss ways that Gertrude Ayer infused cultural knowledge and progressive teaching methods into her school and remained active at challenging injustice in the schools and the larger society until the end of her life. This focus on the cultural and critical consciousness aspect of Gertrude Ayer's leadership conceptualizes the "culturally responsive urban school leader" as public intellectual, curriculum innovator, and social activist.

School Leader as Public Intellectual

Calls for educators to reconceive their educational role as public intellectuals instead of technicians and bureaucratic agents (see, e.g. Giroux, 1985; 1990) fail to recognize the rich historical legacy of African American educators like Gertrude Ayer (and others) who *were* public intellectuals during the first half of the twentieth century (see also Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Ayer's leadership practice provides a vivid example of Foster's (1989) notion of the school administrator as a transformative intellectual. She authored journal articles and investigative reports, organized community forums, wrote a regular column on education in the *New York Amsterdam News*, and campaigned tirelessly for school reform in the public arena throughout her 43-year career as an educator and community leader. She gained early attention for her essay "The Double Task: The Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation" (McDougald, 1925) that appeared in the landmark issue of *Survey Graphic* that launched the "New Negro" literary movement in Harlem in the 1920s. In this essay Ayer analyzed the socioeconomic problems, as well as societal contributions, of four groups of Harlem women, from wealthy to working-class. Challenging the monolithic and stereotypical way in which African American women were perceived by white America, Ayer called for a more accurate representation of Black women's strengths, talents, and challenges. Today this article continues to be cited and read in women's studies courses as an early twentieth century example of African American feminist or "womanist" thinking (Guy-Sheftall, 1995).

Ayer also wrote about the historical role of Black teachers in the African American community (McDougald, 1923a), the need for more sophisticated vocational guidance for African American students (McDougald, 1923b), and argued against the use of corporal punishment, which was widely practiced in the Harlem schools in the 1930s. In her regular column on

women's issues in Harlem's *New York Amsterdam News* she even urged parents not to physically punish their children.¹² Throughout her career Ayer maintained the view that education was as much an art as a science. Although she took further coursework at Hunter College, Columbia University, and City College over the years, she never received her bachelor's degree. Upon retirement Ayer would remark that she had few regrets about not getting a degree, because in her words: "Too many people with B.A.'s only know their subject matter and don't know how to teach." (Human Principal, 1954). Although she lacked formal academic degrees, Ayer's stance as a Black woman intellectual situated her as an "outsider within" (Collins, 1991) intellectual circles in New York City. She drew on both her training as an educator as well as her lived experiences as an African American woman to carve out a public space to discuss issues of race and gender in the Harlem community.

School Leader as Curriculum Innovator

Ayer's educational philosophy aimed to develop African American students' intellectual abilities as well as their responsibility as global citizens by centering them in their history and culture. Witness her thoughts on the role and responsibility of African American teachers to develop a "socio-political consciousness" in students:

It is the high duty of the Negro woman teacher to teach the Negro youth to maintain a critical attitude toward what he learns, rather than to lay emphasis on stuffing and inflating him only with the thoughts of others. . . . Hers is the task of knowing well her race's history and of finding time to impart it in addition to all other standard facts required, and to impart it in such a way that the adolescent student will realize: 1. That, in fundamentals he is essentially the same as other humans. 2. That, being different in some ways does not mean that he is inferior. 3. That, he has a contribution to make to his group. 4. That, his group has a contribution to make to his nation, and 5. That, he has a part in his nation's work in the world. To stimulate this spirit is the most lasting and far-reaching phase of the Negro teacher's work. (McDougald, 1923b, p. 770)

In the mid 1930s Ayer embraced a robust approach to progressive education and the "project method" of curriculum emanating from Teachers College, Columbia University, probably because it dovetailed with her own child-centered and humanistic philosophy of education.¹³ At P.S. 24, which became one of nine Activity Program schools studied and cited for excellence

¹² See "Child Training," *Scrapbook*, GEA papers.

¹³ William Kilpatrick's "project method" involved the development of purposeful activities tied to a child's interests and needs. He argued that students should apply classroom knowledge to meet real community needs. See Kilpatrick (1918).

by the New York City Board of Education, Ayer advocated classroom learning experiences that approximated those in real life. The students tended community gardens, engaged in problem-solving activities, learned math while running school businesses and managing individual savings accounts, chaired student-run conferences and discussion groups, and incorporated multiple forms of writing as part of their project-based activities. One class in the school created their own “school city” based on the government of New York City, complete with judges, sanitation squads, election inspectors, and the replication of other city functions (Woman Principal Runs School Like a ‘Big City,’ 1935). At P.S. 24 Ayer also established the first child guidance services in Harlem and a health and dental clinic for students. Her school became a center for community services in the neighborhood, approximating the model of today’s “full service” schools.

Ayer also believed in incorporating community “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 1992) into the classroom and encouraged Harlem residents to share their expertise with students. When she left P.S. 24 to become the principal of Harlem’s P.S. 119 in 1945 she invited neighborhood carpenters, butchers, and grocers as experts into the school in order to overcome what she termed the “blackboard curtain” between teacher and student and to show children that there were sources of learning outside books. In her words, “The informality helps teachers too. Sometimes they develop a lot of resistance to being a human being.”¹⁴

African American history was an integral element of her child-centered curriculum. In an article that appeared in *Freedomways*, a civil rights journal popular in the 1960s, Ayer reminisced about the Activity Program and some of her former elementary school students (Ayer, 1963). One of her students had become a lawyer, another a banker, another a dentist, another a taxi driver, and one a famous writer. James Baldwin had attended Harlem’s P.S. 24 in the fifth and sixth grades. In Ayer’s words:

I vividly remember his haunted eyes and his slim physique. He was active in school affairs but never intrusive . . . He is using his great talent to convey the sufferings of the Negro Americans and to exhort the white American to examine what his thoughts and acts have made of him. We like to think that the study his class made of the lives of great Negro heroes in American history inspired him to take an active personal part in the present struggle. (p. 381)

Gertrude Ayer’s instructional leadership remained child-centered even after the Activity Program was scuttled in the late 1940s, when progressive education came under attack as “intellectually soft” and “subversive” in the wake of the red-baiting of prominent progressive educators during the Cold

¹⁴ Gertrude Ayer, Schomburg Clipping File, 1925–1974, Sc 000,388–1, Schomburg Center.

War era (Johnson, 2002). Photographs and newspaper accounts of Ayer throughout the 1940s and early 1950s portrayed her as focused on the children: intently listening to a young girl reading a storybook, talking one-on-one with children in the school lunchroom (the first school cafeteria in Harlem), and greeting children as she escorted visitors through the school.

School Leader as Social Activist

Like other African American women educators who were political activists in Harlem during the 1930s and 1940s, Gertrude Ayer incorporated her work as an educator as part of a larger project for racial justice and community uplift (Johnson, 2004). After World War I thousands of young African American women migrated from the rural South to northern cities like New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland in search of job opportunities. In her role as industrial secretary of the New York City Urban League, Ayer took up labor issues that affected African American girls and women. She undertook an extensive survey of the working conditions of African American women that was jointly sponsored by the Urban League, the Women's Trade Union League, and the YWCA (*A New Day for the Colored Woman Worker*, 1919). This groundbreaking study was the first to document the inequalities experienced by African American women who had assumed employment in New York City's factories and shops after World War I. In the 1920s Ayer organized laundry workers with Rose Schneiderman of the Women's Trade Union League and worked with Socialist Frank Crosswaith on the Negro Labor Committee to end discriminatory practices in the labor unions.

As a school leader her social activism included promoting intercultural education and race relations work in Harlem. In the fall of 1934 she brought the Teachers College course on race relations to the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem. During World War II, Ayer worked with pioneer intercultural educator Rachel Davis DuBois as secretary of the Workshop for Cultural Democracy to organize intercultural education workshops for parents and teachers when the Washington Heights neighborhood on the western edge of Harlem experienced racial tensions between Jewish and African American residents.¹⁵

Throughout her life Ayer also gave generously of her time to philanthropic work, an avenue utilized by African American professional women throughout the country in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to provide leadership in community development and uplift (see, e.g., Hine, 1994). She raised money for the Harlem Utopia Club's neighborhood house for child welfare, spoke in cities throughout the Northeast to support the

¹⁵ "Why a Teacher Should Also Serve as a Social Worker," *Scrapbook*, GEA papers.

school camp scholarship fund, and recruited teachers as mentors in an after-school program she started for African American girls in Harlem.¹⁶

After retirement from the New York City Public Schools in 1954, Ayer continued to make her community a better place to live until the end of her life. She chaired a committee on consumer problems in Harlem. She spoke at community forums on “Labor’s Responsibility Towards Integration in the New York City Public Schools.” She continued to write her column in the *New York Amsterdam News* on the Harlem schools. At the age of 80 she came out of retirement to provide a workshop for Black and Puerto Rican women teachers who wanted to become New York City administrators (Negro, Puerto Rican Tutors Flock to Supervisor Classes, 1964). In short, she “walked the talk” as an urban school leader who worked to make her school and the surrounding community more responsive and equitable for her African American students and their families.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

What might we learn from this historical case study of a culturally responsive school leader? The importance of local context looms large in this study—it can support (or discourage) urban principals who “lead for diversity.” Gertrude Ayer came of age as a school leader during a historical time and place of intense political activism. Harlem in the 1930s and early 1940s was populated by a spectrum of political organizations, from mainstream groups like the Urban League and NAACP to radical organizations like the Socialist and Communist parties. Progressive Harlem politicians like Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. led daily pickets on 125th Street to block the entrances of stores that refused to hire Black employees. Tenant organizers staged strikes to protest Harlem’s exorbitant rents. In 1941 labor organizers like A. Philip Randolph, Frank Crosswaith, and Layle Lane mobilized thousands of Black New Yorkers in the fight against segregation in the military and national defense industries through the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). School reformers like Lucile Spence and the Harlem Committee of the Teachers Union of New York City fought for new school construction, the incorporation of African American history in the curriculum, and Black representation on the school board (Johnson, 2004).

In short, during Gertrude Ayer’s tenure as a school leader, militant social activism was viewed as a community responsibility by many of Harlem’s movers and shakers. Although we should not underestimate her personal vision and agency as a school leader, Ayer’s culturally responsive leadership

¹⁶ See *The Harlem Project*, box 18, file 1, IHRC 114, Immigration History Research Center, Anderson Library, University of Minnesota.

practices were no doubt supported and nurtured by many of her fellow Harlemites. Her work was situated within a network of African American intellectuals, labor organizers, religious leaders, politicians, and community activists (and some White political activists as well) who provided intellectual support, organizational and material resources, and constituted a critical mass of progressive reformers bent on structural change in the schools of Harlem.

My point here is that leadership for social justice in general, and culturally responsive school leadership in particular, must be viewed within the historical, social, and political contexts in which it is practiced. How it becomes actualized, then, might vary across particular contexts. Siddle Walker's (2003) recent case study of Ulysses Byas, an African American male principal in a segregated southern school district during the 1950s and 1960s, illustrates how the social and political context might influence leadership practices. Byas relates how he and other African American principals in Georgia found ways to "leapfrog" over obstructionist White superintendents in order to creatively find ways to deliver to the Black community what they perceived they needed. As Byas notes, African American principals in Georgia's segregated schools had to find ways to satisfy the boss and keep their jobs without "losing (their) soul" (Siddle Walker, p. 66).

In today's milieu where there is increasing interest in staking out the theory and practice of leadership for social justice, stories of school leaders from different geographic regions and historical periods who "made a difference" for culturally diverse students and their families can help to establish a historical continuum that illustrates the similarities as well as the differences in socially just leadership practice across contexts. For instance, although much of the history of African American teachers and administrators has focused on schools in the South, recent historical case studies have begun to fill in the gaps of leadership practice in predominately Black schools in northern cities during the 1950s and 1960s (see, e.g., Randolph, 2004; Danns, 2002). Because political activism by school leaders appears to be particularly prominent during periods of social activism in the society at large, fruitful historical periods for inquiry might include the 1930s and World War II (dubbed the "forgotten years of the Negro Revolution" by some historians) as well as the 1960s and the civil rights and Black Power movements. If we were to focus on periods of political activism in Latino, Native American, and Asian American communities across the United States, additional historical periods might surface as well. General questions that could be asked include: How have school leaders interfaced with larger community efforts for social change? How have those social movements in turn influenced school reform efforts? What does it mean to "lead for diversity" in different historical periods and community contexts?

In addition, historical case studies of school leaders like Gertrude Ayer can provide inspiration and direction for the practice of leadership for social justice in today's schools. In the current high-stakes, accountability-driven

policy environment in the United States where urban schools are pressured to raise test scores and standardize curriculum, there is little support from city, state, and national educational officials to incorporate multicultural curriculum and institute diversity policies in urban districts. Some would argue that culturally responsive leadership in the current U.S. context requires urban school leaders to respond to the underlying causes and results of the racial achievement gap in their schools. But, I would argue, school leaders also need models of how they might challenge the status quo of inequitable assessment practices, incorporate students' cultural knowledge into the school curriculum, and work with parents and community activists for social change in the larger community. At a time when diversity efforts have dropped off the agenda in many school districts, historical examples from socially conscious urban school leaders can help point the way.

I often wonder, if Gertrude Ayer were alive today, what would be her leadership stance as an urban school principal? My guess is that she would do many of the things that she did in the 1930s in Harlem to make her school a more culturally responsive environment for her students and her neighborhood a better place to live. She might form alliances with community organizations to bring local cultural knowledge into the classroom, use her political savvy to garner economic, medical and social service resources for the families in her school, and join with parents, community activists, and progressive politicians to agitate for educational equity in the larger society. Isn't that what we mean by culturally responsive urban school leadership?

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